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ISLAMIST ACTIVISM, REVOLUTION AND REGIME CHANGE IN EGYPT

By Ewan Stein

In the immediate wake of the 25 January 2011 uprising in Egypt tensions emerged between two basic Islamist political orientations. The first orientation may be identified as political activism, which embodies the strategy of participation in formal political activity by competing in elections, seeking to shape legislation and influence public debate at the national level, including by establishing political parties. The second orientation can be termed grassroots activism, and entails a focus through preaching, charity and educational activity on the informal and grassroots level.

Prior to the uprising these divergent orientations mapped relatively clearly onto divisions between Islamist groups. Political activism was embraced by the Muslim Brotherhood, which began participating in elections in 1984 by running candidates under the umbrella of the Wafd Party. The Wasat Party, which split from the Brotherhood in 1996 as the result of a combination of internal tensions and a government crackdown, embraced political activism as well. The Labour Party, having gravitated from socialism to Islamism in the context of its electoral alliance with the Brotherhood, also represented a manifestation of Islamist political activism. The Brotherhood had a strong grassroots dimension in addition to its political face, but the grassroots orientation was increasingly exemplified by ultraconservative Salafi networks, most especially the Alexandria-based Salafi Call (al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya), which castigated the Brotherhood for its participation in a formal political realm that was not underpinned by shari‘a. A third political orientation, violent jihadism, gained expression through a number of extremist groups, the largest of which was the Islamic Group (al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya), but had largely disappeared from the Egyptian scene by the end of the 1990s.

Although there were differences of opinion and debates within each trend, an important part of what distinguished these Islamist groups from each other was their position vis-à-vis the appropriate mode of political action. Following the revolution intra-group cleavages came into the open and formalised as Islamist actors were forced to take stock of new circumstances and reconsider political strategies and approaches. Groups that were previously committed to a grassroots orientation

established parties and entered the formal political arena for the first time. Such groups were no longer distinguishable according to their attitude towards formalised political participation, which for them had suddenly become the norm rather than the exception. However, in the wake of the Muslim Brotherhood's abortive experience in power the pendulum appears to be swinging again toward grassroots preoccupations, with Islamist political activism having seemingly been exhausted. Yet even grassroots Islamism has an uncertain future, particularly as a fourth orientation—that of Islamist protest activism—gains traction.

Islamism in Egypt prior to the uprising

Prior to the 25 January 2011 uprising Islamist political activism was in crisis. The Muslim Brotherhood, which had performed strongly in the 2005 parliamentary elections by winning 20 percent of seats, failed to win a single one in November 2010 after boycotting the runoffs in what was widely considered to be a blatantly rigged contest.¹ The regime, keen to minimise the Brotherhood's role in any post-Mubarak transition, steadily cracked down on the Brotherhood following its 2005 showing by arresting members and freezing funds. Islamism as a political project seemed to be unravelling. Within the Brotherhood, the accession of a hard-line 'organisational' man, Mohammed Badie, to the position of General Guide, and the marginalisation of key reformist figures like Abdul Munim Abu al-Futuh, signalled a shift away from electoral engagement and consensus politics and towards grassroots retrenchment, a more accommodationist stance vis-à-vis the regime and ideological rigidity.²

The retreat from political activism, however, was also fraught with problems. Despite being Egypt's most established non-state actor with an extensive national infrastructure and clear mobilisational capacity, the Muslim Brotherhood was losing ground to other political and religious forces. At the grassroots level the Brotherhood competed with ultraconservative networks of Salafi preachers that focussed on grassroots preaching and charitable works, and studiously avoided formal politics. Like the Brotherhood, the Salafi movement provided social safety nets and structures of belonging.³ It represented an alternative vehicle for low-risk religious expression and belonging for Egyptians of all classes, but perhaps most notably for the poor and rural-urban migrants uprooted from existing family and communal support networks. The Salafi Call began as a student movement in the 1970s and was part of the same

Islamist revival movement to which the Brotherhood belonged. Among its leaders were those returning from exile in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The Salafi Call was more of a loose network of shaykhs with their own followers than a 'group' as such, and Salafis in general opposed 'group action' (*'amal jama'i*) as a matter of principle. Like other Islamist trends, the Salafi Call enjoyed a considerable degree of state tolerance during the 1980s.

One of the Brotherhood's objectives since its re-emergence onto the Egyptian political scene in the 1970s and 1980s was to rebuild its following among the urban middle classes, the stratum that formed the backbone of the movement prior to 1954. This involved ideological 'moderation' (as associated with the reformist, so-called *wasatiyya*, trend in the 1980s) in order to make the idea of an Islamic state more palatable for outward-looking middle class Egyptians. The rebuilding process also involved organisational innovations to bring the movement out of clandestinity and render membership respectable and safe for this class.

The Brotherhood's progress in both these areas was slowed by the regime's clampdown in 1995, which disproportionately targeted reformist elements within the movement.⁴ Joining the Muslim Brotherhood no longer seemed like such a safe option for devout urban middle class Egyptians in comparison with the less contentious idiom of Salafism or even the passive 'pro-business' piety promoted as a lifestyle choice by new preachers like Amr Khalid.⁵

The third main orientation within Egyptian political Islam, violent jihadism, was more or less stamped out by the end of the 1990s. The Islamic Group (IG), along with smaller groups like the Jihad Organisation (Tanzim al-Jihad), abstained from formal political activity not only to focus on preaching and social work, but also to prepare for and engage in armed struggle to overthrow the regime. The war of attrition between the regime and jihadists had tilted decisively in favour of the former by 1997, with the Luxor massacre of that year representing the last real spurt of jihadist militancy.⁶ The imprisoned jihadist leaders published detailed recantations of their previous *takfiri* positions, leaving advocacy of violent anti-regime jihad to Egyptians outside of the country, most prominently Osama bin Laden's deputy and former Jihad Organisation leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. As IG and Jihad Organisation leaders and members were gradually released from prison in the early 2000s the groups entered an already crowded Salafi public sphere. Their main contribution to public discourse was—as part of a regional chorus of 'deradicalised' jihadists—to

articulate from the inside, an alternative to al-Qaeda's ideology and strategy.⁷ But with the core membership aging and closely monitored, the prospects of rebuilding the IG as a mass opposition movement, violent or otherwise, appeared dim. Debates within the group around whether or not to formalise the IG's political strategy through the formation of a political vehicle remained, until the fall of Mubarak, largely below the surface.

Salafis, (ex-)jihadists and new preachers competed with the Brotherhood as vehicles for Islamist mobilisation. However, they could not be meaningfully described as oppositional to a regime that tolerated and encouraged them on the basis that they abstain from political contestation. It was the Brotherhood's combining of grassroots support with political engagement that enabled it to claim the mantle of formal opposition.

But new secular players were outstripping the Brotherhood as an oppositional force during the 2000s. The politics of opposition, which the Brotherhood had sought to advance via its presence in parliament and in the professional syndicates, were moving from these discredited formal arenas and into the streets, factories and the Internet. Largely non-ideological, cross-partisan movements like Kefaya mobilised among the urban middle classes on the issue of democracy. Groups like the April 6 youth movement formed in solidarity with workers striking over corrupt and unfair economic policies. Although some Muslim Brotherhood members joined Kefaya, as a whole the Brotherhood never overcame its longstanding antipathy toward labour activism and demonstrations against the regime.⁸ Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood acted at times as a means through which the state could control protests on 'safe' foreign policy issues such as opposition to the US invasion of Iraq.⁹ As the Egyptian uprising of 2011 began, political Islamism appeared to have run its course. The Muslim Brotherhood was losing ground as a grassroots movement to the Salafis, and as an activist movement to Kefaya, April 6, and other new oppositional movements.

Islamism in Egypt during and after the uprising

The mass outpouring against the rule of Hosni Mubarak presented challenges and opportunities for all forms of political Islam in Egypt. All trends, with the exception of some of the more 'activist' (*haraki*) Salafis, joined the revolution on the back foot.¹⁰ The Brotherhood, whose thunder as a protest movement had already been

stolen by Kefaya and other activist oppositional groups, was trapped between either crossing a clear line in the sand by joining anti-Mubarak demonstrations (and inviting fierce regime retaliation if the revolution failed) or remaining passive and losing what minimal credibility it had among a newly politicised public. In the end the Brothers chose a middle path, joining the uprising on the 28 January's 'Friday of Rage', but at the same time opening channels of communication with the regime in a bid to protect themselves and claim a stake in whatever political order might emerge.

Salafis charted a similar course of delayed participation combined with reaching out to the regime. But for them the dilemma was yet more complex. Wholeheartedly endorsing the revolution would shatter the reputation for political passivity that had won them the approval of the Mubarak regime as a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood. Their participation would certainly lead to repression if the revolution failed. On the other hand, Salafi leaders feared that any political dividend accruing to the Brotherhood would be at their expense. If the Brotherhood was able to monopolise political power it, unlike Mubarak, would have no reason to nurture an Islamic societal movement like the Salafi Call. Such a movement would instead be viewed as a direct competitor with the Brotherhood's own structures of mobilisation, patronage and influence in society. In the absence of an authoritarian protector like Mubarak the Salafis could not remain above the fray.

The IG leaders viewed things differently still. The IG had no significant remaining national infrastructure that could pose a threat to, or be threatened by, the Muslim Brotherhood. As such the uprising offered first and foremost an opportunity to rebuild this infrastructure through political engagement under the wing of the Muslim Brotherhood as Egypt's most powerful Islamist force. The widely assumed deal that those leaders had made with the security forces to secure their release from prison made it difficult for the IG to put itself forward as a revolutionary player, other than by rather tenuously painting the uprising as a continuation of its own jihad against Mubarak in the 1990s. The key author of what was known as the 'revisions' literature (in which the IG moderated its previous radical positions), Najih Ibrahim, explicitly exhorted Egyptians to respect the legitimacy of Mubarak's rule during the early days of the uprising.¹¹ Perhaps inevitably, the leadership team centred on Ibrahim, and Karim Zuhdi was pushed aside to make way for those less tainted by accusations of compromise and connivance. Among those who played a prominent role in this new team were Isam Dirbala, known to have had reservations about the

extent of the group's *mea culpa* in the 2000s, and the newly released Abbud and Tariq Zumar. Both were hardliners who had not participated in the revisions process but who favoured formal political engagement.

Whereas before the uprising the Brotherhood, Wasat and the Labour Party (frozen from 2000) comprised the spectrum of formalised Islamism, during 2011 all major Islamist trends established political parties to contest elections and help to shape the post-Mubarak political order. The fall of Mubarak represented a critical juncture that strengthened the influence and salience of those favouring formalisation within the Brotherhood, the Salafi movement and the jihadist trend. But paralleling the split within the IG, some Salafi shaykhs bemoaned the mistake, from both strategic and jurisprudential perspectives, that the Salafi Call was making by establishing the Nour Party.¹² Divergences within the Muslim Brotherhood over the extent to which it should throw its weight behind the electoral process were also sharpening.

In a bid to reassure Egypt's revolutionary public and other Islamist and non-Islamist political actors that it was not seeking to 'hijack' the revolution or monopolise power, the Muslim Brotherhood initially adopted a conciliatory approach to the transition, building on its pre-uprising experience of coalition building. It promised not to contest more than a third of seats in parliament and not to put forward a candidate for the presidency.¹³ But with the revolutionary movement running out of steam and maligned in the media, not just the military but also other 'remnants' of the old regime felt they could calm the streets without the assistance of the Brotherhood or other Islamist groups. The contradictory dynamics of the regime and the street exacerbated divisions within the Brotherhood. As the pillars of the regime grew in confidence through 2011 and 2012, the assessment of the situation changed for a narrow majority of the Brotherhood leadership, thus shifting the organisation's political direction to a new 'winner takes all' approach.

In the context of the evolving balance of forces, the Brotherhood's inclusive strategy gave way to zero-sum politics, as did that of its erstwhile secular allies. The Brotherhood's cross-party coalition collapsed before the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections. Its Freedom and Justice Party emerged strongest in the electoral outcome, followed by a Salafi list led by the Nour Party and including the IG's Building and Development Party. Frustrated at being unable to form a government, and perhaps fearing (accurately) that the Islamist-dominated parliament would be dissolved, the

Brotherhood backtracked on its commitment not to field a presidential candidate. The Brotherhood's decision to field a candidate was finally made by a very narrow margin (56 to 52 votes) when put to vote in the group's Shura Council.¹⁴

Islamists' decisions to formalise their political presence soon after Mubarak's ouster alienated them from a significant part of the revolutionary public. All the main groups strongly supported the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in its plan to amend, rather than replace, the constitution and proceed with early elections in 2011. This led to accusations against Islamist groups of collusion with SCAF to end the revolution, leaving the backbone of the regime and the 'deep state' intact. In championing the holding of elections sooner rather than later, Islamists correctly banked on the fact that their name recognition, organisational capacity and grassroots presence would deliver them victory. The prevailing Islamist strategy was essentially to exploit popular pressure on the regime in order to formalise their political presence rather than to seek any kind of mandate from the revolutionary public for a process of genuine regime change.

This instrumentalisation of the revolutionary opportunity arguably weakened the Islamist movement as a whole vis-à-vis the regime. The alliance between the Brotherhood and the Salafi Call was built on shaky ground. Although they were able to cooperate in order to help secure the election of the Brotherhood's presidential candidate, Mohammed Morsi, they had run separate lists in the parliamentary elections and the Salafi group had endorsed Abdul Munim Abu al-Futuh, who had been expelled from the Brotherhood because of his decision to run for president in the first round. It was only when forced to choose between Morsi and the regime candidate Ahmed Shafiq that the Salafi Call backed the Brotherhood's choice.

Splits within the Salafi ranks also came into the open in the context of the presidential race. In particular, the candidacy of Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, the key figurehead of a new 'revolutionary Salafism' that set itself openly against the military regime and pushed for the application of shari'a as a priority, posed a threat to the Salafi Call's strategy of accommodation against the Muslim Brotherhood. The followers of Abu Ismail (the Hazemoon), the Salafi Front and other 'activist' Salafi formations embodied a rejection of instrumentalising revolutionary pressure in order to formalise political participation in favour of appropriating and embodying the revolutionary impulse itself.

This was as terrifying for the new ‘political Salafis’ as it was for the regime itself. The Salafi Call’s endorsement of Abu al-Futuh reflected its rivalry with the Brotherhood, but also its wariness of the implications of supporting Abu Ismail. The latter drew support from a dedicated group of followers, inspired many within the Salafi Call’s rank and file, and represented a potentially incendiary bridge between Islamists and the broader revolutionary public.¹⁵ As such, it came as something of a relief for the leadership of the Salafi Call when Abu Ismail was disqualified from the presidential race, sparing the group from more serious splintering.¹⁶

During Morsi’s brief incumbency the Salafis continued to resist any Brotherhood dominance of the regime and state infrastructure with as much urgency as the secular National Salvation Front (NSF). The closer the Brotherhood appeared to be to formalising its control and ‘Ikhwanising’ the state, the more the Salafis of the Salafi Call and Nour Party sought to balance its apparently hegemonic aspirations. This meant forming alliances against the Brotherhood with the NSF and, as came to pass, the military. Ironically, given its reluctance to build a constituency within the revolutionary movement itself, Morsi’s main source of support outside of the Brotherhood came from the Hazemoun and other revolutionary Salafi formations.¹⁷ The electoral approach, which had failed to enable the Brotherhood to consolidate power at the state level, was giving way to increasingly antagonistic politics of street protest that pitted the Brotherhood and Salafi youth against a ‘liberal’ protest movement and the police.

The Muslim Brotherhood was thus isolated at the level of the state and, it turned out, overwhelmed on the streets as the large-scale popular mobilisation organised by the Rebel (Tamarod) campaign gathered steam in June 2013. The Brotherhood failed to convince the protest movement that it had any revolutionary aspirations or potential, particularly in comparison to the more robust and uncompromising alternatives being advanced by Abu Ismail and others. Being also unable or unwilling to pursue inclusive politics at the state level, the Brothers found themselves with nowhere to turn as millions of Egyptians clamoured for Morsi’s removal.

Political naiveté and overreach offer a partial explanation for the Brotherhood’s predicament, but a more fundamental factor was the recovery of the old regime following the challenge of 25 January. This recovery meant that the pressure from below generated by the initial uprising, which had suddenly made the

Brotherhood valuable to SCAF, dissipated. The Brotherhood was thus convinced that it had to grab power while it still could. Additionally, from the Brotherhood's perspective there was little reason to trust either a Salafi movement that had been nurtured by Mubarak and had no problem compromising with authoritarian rule, or a rather paranoid secular opposition that had no popular base and thus depended on state support for its political survival.

The 3 July coup ushered in the most repressive period in Egypt's modern history.¹⁸ In the wake of Morsi's ouster the goal of the generals appears to be to the permanent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood as a player in Egyptian politics and society. Brotherhood and Islamist leaders have been detained in waves of arrests that swept up not only hardliners, but also 'moderate' Islamists like Wasat Party leader Abu Elela Mady. Whereas Mubarak came down hardest on those seeking to expand the formal dimensions of the Brotherhood's activity, the post-coup leadership, centred on the military and security apparatus, appears bent on decimating its grassroots activities as well.

In this vendetta the military rulers have been abetted by the Salafi Call and most secular parties. Many Salafis, both rank and file and shaykhs, sympathise with Morsi and baulk at the military's brutal treatment of protesters. But the Salafi Call and the Nour Party were quick to fall into line behind the generals following Morsi's removal, supporting Sisi's 'roadmap' and hoping for a seat at the new table. The Nour Party attempted to atone for this apparent betrayal of the Islamist cause by ensuring the new constitution retained at least some of the flavour of the 2012 'Islamist' constitution. The attempt to preserve Article 219, which elaborates on the 'principles' of shari'a stipulated in Article 2, foundered, however, within a predominantly secular drafting committee.

In contrast to the Nour Party, Islamist political forces that backed Morsi when he was in power have joined the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy in the politics of street protest. In the past, the dividing line within the Islamist movement was on whether or not to engage politically. Now a new line of fissure has opened up between Islamist actors that back continued street protests and those that favour a return to grassroots activism, combined with some sort of compromise or reconciliation with the military. These new distinctions, as before, run within rather than between the groups. For example, while the IG and its Building and Development Party strongly support Morsi, one of the historic leaders of the IG,

Fouad al-Dawalibi, formed the al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya Reform Front in February 2014. Bringing together those leaders (including Ibrahim and Zuhdi) that were sidelined after the revolution, the Reform Front endorses the roadmap put in place by Sisi’s government and calls for dissolving the Building and Development Party and returning to the Jama‘a’s true calling of *da‘wa* and social work.¹⁹

The National Alliance to Support Legitimacy, which was set up to oppose the coup and campaign for Morsi’s reinstatement, has attracted the support of smaller Salafi groupings such as the Salafi Front, the Hazemoun, and the IG. These groups, alongside the Brotherhood youth, seek to rekindle a degree of revolutionary legitimacy in order to return to the pre-coup status quo ante. This new Islamist protest movement shares a unity of goals, if not strategies, with a steadily re-emerging jihadist trend that has exacted a heavy toll since the July 2013 coup.²⁰ As the security crackdown continues it is not unreasonable to expect that the Islamist protest movement, to the extent it survives, will further radicalise.

Conclusion

Of all the Islamist formations discussed above, the Salafi Call has emerged strongest from the coup despite its inability to inject Islamism into the new constitution. The Muslim Brotherhood may be finished as a formal political actor, with the 2011-2013 phase perhaps representing the final twitch of a near decade-long decline. What distinguishes the current phase from previous ones, however, is that the Sisi regime is bent on extinguishing the Muslim Brotherhood as a quietist phenomenon too. This does not necessarily bode well for the future of the Salafi Call. If the Brotherhood’s infrastructure collapses completely, the utility for the regime of Salafism as an independent social movement and counterweight will be diminished. Sisi’s solution to filling the Islamist void appears to be a combination of Islamic charismatic legitimacy (at least one shaykh has likened him to a prophet) and the greater institutionalisation of religion via al-Azhar and the Ministries of Religious Endowments and Social Solidarity.²¹

But the long-term success of such strategies will require significant resources and/or populist policy successes that may prove elusive for the regime. Even if grassroots retrenchment, and to a lesser extent jihadism, has been vindicated at the expense of electoral Islamism by the fate of Morsi’s administration, the causes of

discontent that led to the 25 January uprising have not gone away, and the continued vigour of the anti-coup movement suggests that it may be the protesting, as opposed to political or grassroots, face of political Islam that is being forged in the post-July 2013 period. Although Islamist protesters are not alone in opposing the coup, and nor are they the only ones to have suffered at the hands of the security force for protesting, they have as yet failed to tap into the kind of more generalised discontent that underpinned the mass uprisings of 25 January 2011 and 30 June 2013.²²